Jane Doe v. MySpace, Inc. et al Doc. 4 Att. 12

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TECHNOLOGY

From MySpace to Safer Space?

Worried by reports of sexual predators, the Web phenom gets tougher about protecting minors

MySpace.com is getting serious about online safety. The popular social network said on Apr. 11 it has hired a former federal prosecutor to be its first chief security officer. That came a day after the site, along with other Newscorp Web sites and TV channels, began airing public-service announcements promoting online user safety.

Almost overnight, MySpace has become an online force to be reckoned with. It has amassed more than 70 million registered users, from fewer than 10 million just over a year ago. Acquired by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. (NWS) in July, MySpace lets users create profiles where they can publish photos and personal information and link to friends' profiles. It has become nothing short of wildly popular among teens and increasingly, the preteen set.

Hence the need for safety. In the last few months, several accounts of sexual predators targeting minors they have met through the site have emerged, creating concern among parents, schools, and public officials. "We feel that the situation on MySpace is endemic to the Internet and society in general," says MySpace Chief Executive Chris DeWolfe.

TRIPLE STRATEGY In response, DeWolfe has mapped out a three-prong strategy to address safety concerns. MySpace is putting in place security technology, such as tools that let children aged 14-16 shield their personal info from strangers. (As it stands, children under 14 aren't allowed to create profiles, though many children below that age lie about their age and create profiles anyway.)

Another emphasis: manpower to police the site. Right now, a human eye reviews every photo that is uploaded directly onto the Web, says DeWolfe. And MySpace will continue to promote education through relationships with partners such as the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) and online safety charity WiredSafety.org.

Heading up this strategy will be Hemanshu Nigam, who currently serves as director of consumer security outreach and child-safe computing at Microsoft (MSFT). On May 1, the former prosecutor will begin to oversee safety, education, and privacy programs and law enforcement affairs for MySpace.com. He also plans to tackle online safety for other Fox Interactive sites.

HOLISTIC APPROACH At Microsoft, Nigam led the cross-company child-safety initiative, which was launched to build a holistic approach to safe computing for children. He also served as the company's spokesperson on virus, hacking, and spam enforcement outreach, and on online child-protection and law enforcement outreach.

During his stint as a federal prosecutor he specialized in child exploitation cases. "They couldn't have picked a better person to bring into their organization to help beef up the security, especially for children," says John Sheehan, who directs the Cybertip safety line at the NCMEC.

News Corp. also is joining with the Advertising Council and the NCMEC to launch an advertising campaign that will educate parents and young people about Internet safety. Entitled "Don't Believe the Type," the spots direct readers to a Web site that provides tips for youngsters on safer surfing, and warns that one in five children is sexually solicited online.

These moves may go a long way to appease parents, school administrators, and public officials. However, many still question whether the gargantuan site has done enough to ensure young users are protected. Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal has been outspoken in his efforts to pressure MySpace.com to focus on safety (see BW Online, 3/06/06, "Making MySpace Safe for Kids").

NOT ENOUGH? In a statement, Blumenthal applauded the public safety campaign and new security position, but said the steps were "hardly sufficient." He said they must be followed by "more significant, specific measures that we have also urged MySpace to take." In a March interview, Blumenthal declined to specify those steps, through he said the company had been "very responsive."

Meanwhile, the NCMEC's Sheehan applauds MySpace's speedy efforts, but he says he hopes the site will take even more steps. He says MySpace could do more to limit keyword searches, preventing predators and others from searching profiles based on broad terms like "cheerleader" or "10-year-old girls." He'd also like to see the site make it easier for parents and children to remove profiles, and ultimately, he says, limit profiles to clients over 18.

But Sheehan acknowledges such moves, if not carefully orchestrated, might backfire, driving users away. Says Sheehan, "The fact is, whether it's Myspace or another site, the children are going to move to the next Web site and the predators are going to follow the children."

"SAFE SITE." "If they sterilize the place, it won't be a place where hipsters will hang out anymore," says Jupiter Research analyst David Card. That could cause advertisers to flee as well.

Meantime, efforts are afoot to foster safety on social sites elsewhere on the Web. WiredSafety founder Parry Aftab, who has consulted with MySpace on safety among other issues, is planning a June summit in Los Angeles where social networking sites and Internet companies like Facebook.com, Tagged.com, and Bebo.com, plus companies like Google (GOOG) and Microsoft, can join MySpace in developing new and better ways to keep kids safe online.

And DeWolfe says that putting up a cool site and keeping it safe are not mutually exclusive. "Ninety-nine percent of the users on our site use it to express themselves, and they don't want to violate the terms of service," said DeWolfe. "Our users wanted a safe site." Now they may finally be getting one.

By Jessi Hempel

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